LO, HOW A ROSE E'RE BLOOMING

December 14, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose." --Isaiah 35:1 (KJV)

Scripture
Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Everyone has a relative like John the Baptist. Everyone has a cousin, brother or sister who is nearly an opposite in character, attitude, life style. If you are once married and live in the suburbs with 2.7 children and a station wagon, the relative I mean lives in an Old Town loft, alone - sometimes, and goes to work at the health-food shop on a skateboard. If you are a Presbyterian Elder, the relative I mean is a belligerent atheist. If you are a broker, the relative I mean is happy selling used cars. The cousin I mean is the one who suggested that smoking Lucky Strikes at the Sunday School picnic was more interesting than singing hymns: the one who somehow secreted a forbidden BB gun to a family reunion and, from a hidden command post in a tree, actually took aim at everyone's favorite aunt and hit her where no one should be hit with a BB. It's not that you are embarrassed by your cousin, but every time you're together it's close.

Everyone has a relative like that. Jesus did. His name was John. His mother and Jesus' mother were related. The boys were about the same age. But while Jesus was living a fairly unremarkable life tending to his family by managing a carpenter shop in Nazareth, his cousin John was off in the wilderness, perhaps a member of a radical religious sect, learning how to live off the land and to preach radical theology which had a way of becoming radical politics which had a way of keeping John in perennial trouble with the law. John was a fiery preacher out of the prophetic mold. Without blinking, he looked the social, political, religious establishment in the eye and said the whole thing reminded him of a den of snakes. Common folks liked that part and in impressive numbers went to hear John speak when he was in the vicinity. As a mark of repentance and renewal, John baptized people in the river. One day he baptized his cousin Jesus of Nazareth and something clicked for both of them: something that was in their separate consciousness came into focus. John said once, "I am not worthy to carry the sandals of the one who comes after me." He and Jesus and perhaps a few others knew what that meant.

And then they went separate ways apparently. Jesus gathered a few friends and began to teach around Galilee. John traveled far and wide, continuing to bash the hypocrisy of the respectable people - and when he publicly embarrassed the self-important puppet king by criticizing his marital shenanigans, he was thrown in jail. One can almost hear the audible sigh of relief from the respectable people who were the object of John's criticism. "Went too far this time, didn't he? Always knew he'd

press too hard. Trouble maker, I always said. He's been asking for it all his life. Now he'll get what he deserves."

And those very people, Scribes and Pharisees, think it is amusing one day when friends of John come to Jesus and unfortunately, but typically - without much sensitivity, blurt out something like this: "John wants to know Jesus: are you the one, or should we be looking somewhere else? Remember that hot summer day two years ago when John baptized you - and said Behold the lamb of God! Well, he wants to know if that was right." And it's at that point that the people who overhear it start to snicker because it's beginning to look and sound like comic opera, if not theater of the absurd - the Messiah as an itinerant carpenter and his forerunner in jail.

Jesus does two things with that situation. He sends John a cryptic message. He doesn't argue or become defensive or make any claims for himself. He says, "Tell John - the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear." The cryptic part, the part Jesus doesn't have to say - would sound like this. "You'll recognize that sequence, John, as a direct reference to one of our favorite passages of Scripture, from Isaiah the Prophet- about the day when the crocus blooms in the desert and the lame man leaps and the dumb sing - the new day when God's Kingdom comes. It's here, John. The desert does blossom on occasion - and, John, remember the promise: the part about how good the news is for the weak and trembling, the prisoners, the captives. Be strong, fear not, John." That's the message Jesus sent back to John in Herod's prison down by the Dead Sea.

And then, because blood is thicker than water and because Jesus loves him at a level family members love one another - far deeper, that is to say, than liking or approving, - Jesus defends John and poignantly reminds the ones who are chuckling that John was strong and decisive and faithful and, like the prophets before him, uncompromising in his commitment to the truth and that there was a day not long ago when that was commendation enough, when people celebrated that instead of laughing at it.

What a curious text for Advent. What a peculiar incident to ponder on December 14, at the very pinnacle of pre-Christmas preparation. We have been staying with the ecumenical lectionary this Advent and it is instructive to recall that Christians all over the world are thinking about this text today. It is even more instructive to recall that for perhaps 1,700 years, this peculiar and poignant incident and its haunting question, "Are you the one" has been read by the church a week and a half before Christmas. Add it to that list of anomalies you encounter in church in this season: the culture is ablaze with light and the church almost hunkers down and recalls days of Israel's exile and captivity: the culture calculates the shopping days left with the ardor of a space shot countdown and the church talks about the end of the age, coming like a thief in the night: the culture is adorned with festive red and green and the church gets out the purple; the culture sings joyously about jingle bells, winter wonderland and chestnuts roasting, and the church's advent repertoire is all in a minor key. And now this - in the middle of Mistletoe Bears, and Frosty the Snowman, and Santa's helpers - here comes the church dredging up the uncouth, abrasive second cousin of Jesus, about to be executed - raising his embarrassing questions. Biblical scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeir,

says about John, "He is not a character you make up in ceramics and place beside the sweet cherubs and lambs around the creche. He does not go with shepherds and angels and peace on earth, good will toward men." (Preaching as Theology & Art, p. 72)

What's he doing in the middle of our Christmas preparation, then, beside muddying the water? First of all, he's there to remind us of what the celebration is about. His question has a way of clarifying the issue and sometime - simply raising it. It's helpful to recall - at the heighth of the season, that from the beginning the church has celebrated the birth of Jesus as a kind of counter culture observance, a form of protest against rampant paganism. The date of December 25 was chosen to give Christians something to celebrate as the entire Roman world enjoyed a week-long bacchanalian party to celebrate the return of the Sun after the Winter Solstice. It's helpful to recall that the deeply felt sentiment everyone experiences at Christmas is wonderful, but the truth the Christian church is trying to celebrate is good because it is strong and challenging and exhilarating and sometimes disturbing. And so, I conclude that there is great wisdom here in remembering him and his embarrassing question. In fact, I would suggest that we need John's story to remind us, in the very middle of the wonderland our Christmas becomes, that life is real and sometimes harsh and often cruel. John is in jail. He's going to die soon and knows it. And he wants to know if it matters at all, ultimately; is it for real, is there anything of relevance to the hope for the coming of God's Kingdom, or was it all a lovely dream, a pleasant but essentially harmless miscalculation.

I think the question is still asked, .. "Are you the one?" I think the thousands of people who hustle along the Michigan Avenue sidewalk, caught up in the wonder and beauty of it all, who look up at the gray structure of this Gothic building with a wreath on the front of it, sometimes ask - "Is it really true? Is he the one? Is there anything to whatever it is you are talking about in there - and we out here are trying so desperately to celebrate? Is there anything going on that makes a difference in the world? Or is it simply sentimentality?"

The question comes in different forms sometimes. "OK, ok, so a baby was born. But if he was the Prince of Peace, how come there is no peace?..So God loves the world and gave us baby Jesus, then how come there are babies with leukemia and a nine year old was shot in the chest at Cabrini-Green and 250 children are in jail as enemies of the state in South Africa? Sometimes the questions are as embarrassing as that. And sometimes they are private, unspeakably personal. Why don't I feel better? I'm successful, healthy, on top of things .. Why can't I be happy? Why am I captive to my own restless egotism, my own body, my own limitations? Why, dear God, can't I be whole and free and at peace? Sometimes the questions take the form of the great, tormented literary themes of our age - the question of alienation and despair and hopelessness and loneliness. For almost all of us the basic question of authenticity - Is it true? - Is he the one? -lurks just beneath the surface, at this time particularly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Letter & Papers From Prison, tells how the Nazi guards softened a bit at Christmas and brought in a coronet player to play carols. But his fellow inmates became restless and made rude

noises - because they couldn't deal with the sentimentality of Christmas.

John's story is important precisely because he asks the embarrassing question. John the Baptist is a prophet of God because it is God, I submit, who stirs those questions in us. "Never be afraid of the questions," a great teacher said. (Paul Scherer, The Word God Sent.) It is God's spirit, I have come to believe, who stirs up turmoil, who makes us restless, who forces the embarrassing questions on us. The spiritual pilgrimage for many, if not most of us - I am discovering, begins not with a bright clear moment of revelation, or an unmistakable word from the Lord, but with a question, a probing, nagging question.

The embarrassing questions keep us honest. When we are tempted to dismiss the world and use religion as a private spiritual retreat, the outer limits of which are our own small experiences, the question reminds us that the Kingdom is supposed to come in the world, that there is work to be done, that to love God in any way that is recognizable is to love the men and women and children of the world. The embarrassing questions - need to be asked, lest we conclude that all that is required of us is to feel good about the Nativity.

The embarrassing questions of truth need to be asked. In Louisiana, a major argument about the teaching of something called Creationism in the public schools is now in court again. And once again it appears to the world that one must decide between science or the Bible; either objective, verifiable truth or religion. It is so important for the religious community not to fear the truth, not to hide from science, but to applaud open, thorough inquiry, to support the pursuit of truth and the radical academic freedom it requires. It is absolutely essential that we hear John's timeless question, " Is it true?"

"Tell John that it's happening," Jesus said - the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and poor people hear good news proclaimed to them. The ancient hope that sustained God's people across centuries of struggle and war and captivity and rebuilding, that marvelous vision of a world at peace, of nature and humankind living in harmony, of the desert blossoming with crocuses and rose buds - the dream lives on and little by little becomes reality.

John's embarrassing question reminds us that the Biblical hope is external and tangible and historical: that from the beginning God's people have lived in expectation of peace and reconciliation, not just in their hearts but in the world, of an actual kingdom where justice exists for all people, where violence is ended. John's stubborn question reminds us that the kingdom is not here yet, but more than that, it reminds us of how fragile and precious that hope is and how essential our task as its custodian. Our world is hard on visions. We live in a world where preparation for the day when all life will be obliterated forever, commands our national attention and treasure and spiritual energy and peacemaking is characterized as unrealistic, naive, soft. The hope is fragile. The Tribune series on public housing in Chicago was timely testimony that our world produces bad news for the poor, not good news; disturbing news for the oppressed, not liberating news. And in an epidemic of mindless

terrorism, our world teaches us, with ghastly literalism, that without hope people perish.

We are - we Christians - I like to think, custodians of the hope. We are the ones who won't let it go: who won't be insulted or intimidated into betraying the precious hope of a healed earth and a peaceful human family. We are in charge of pointing to signs of the kingdom: signs that Jesus of Nazareth is the one. We are in charge of living for the vision and then pointing to its signs, modest as they might be. A crocus in the desert, after all, isn't very impressive. We Christians are in charge of the hope - and at our best we live it, we feed the hungry, and house the homeless and ask the persistently embarrassing questions about the wonderful economy which makes our life style possible but keeps creating and keeps producing more capital for people who already have it and keeps a permanently unemployed underclass; and we welcome the unclean and we visit the captive and we advocate for the lame and the deaf. At our best we are like a small green shoot out of what looks like a dead stump, or a rose blooming in an unlikely desert...In one of our Presbyterian Cathedral churches, the homeless are actually given a place to sleep. Homeless people are the equivalent of the unclean, the lepers - the untouchables. They are also the dead, for all practical purposes, because once on the street, their life expectancy is somewhere between two and three years. Willie, like many of them, was seriously ill with a variety of infections and respiratory problems. On a cold night last winter, he just made it to the church shelter door. The volunteers carried him inside and there - warm, cared for, loved - he died - under a sign which that Presbyterian Church has the grace to display in its shelter. It says "You are welcome here, in the name of Jesus Christ." (First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia) That's the Christian witness, the hope at its best.

John reminds us that the good new of the Gospel is powerful, particularly in prison. He wrote from Herod's prison where he would die, and his story reminded me of other prisoners whose captivity could not quiet the hope that was, by God's grace, within them.

I thought of Eli Wiesel, who was awarded a Nobel Prize last week, and who saw parents and sister die in a concentration camp, but who survived. Wiesel writes:.."how strange it is that the survivors of the Holocaust are precisely the ones who can yet believe .." (Walter Brueggemann, Hope Within History, p.3).

I thought of St. Paul in a Roman jail, writing to his friends in Philippi - "Rejoice, again, I say, rejoice."

And I thought of Bonhoeffer, from his cell in a Nazi prison, writing his parents, on December 17, 1943. "For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I daresay it will have more meaning and will be observed with greater sincerity here in this prison than in places where all that survives of the feast is its name." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison", p 77-78)

Bonhoeffer died with a serenity and internal peace which have become powerful testimony not simply to his courage, but to the reality of the Gospel. I like to imagine that John, when he heard the message Jesus sent,

and thought about it a bit in his dungeon in that awful desert prison, waiting for his death .. also found peace and wholeness and profound joy.

So to you and me the message comes. Our prisons are not dramatic. Pray God they will never be. But without much imagination we can translate the Biblical images of blindness and dumbness, and uncleanness and lameness - into conditions which, in fact, do inhibit us, and imprison us. And to us, come the gracious words of Jesus, about a love that overcomes all that: a love that comes into our lives and brings new birth, new life, new strength, new courage, new hope.

Is he the one? Is it true? At the heart of the celebration is there hard reality we can count on? - That's still the question. And the answer is not a philosophic argument, but a sign of a mysterious kingdom of peace and justice and love, which is coming, and does on occasion, come peacefully into the world and into our lives, a kingdom celebrated in poetry and song and laughter.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, for instance -

> "I say that we are wound
> with mercy round & round
> as if with air"
> (The Blessed Virgin Compared
> to the Air We Breath, - see
> E. Achtemeir, op c.t., p80)

Or an ancient carol -

> "Lo, How a Rose E'er blooming
> from tender stem has sprung."

Or the prophet Isaiah, 700 years before the fact:

> "The wilderness & the dry land
> shall be glad,
> the desert shall rejoice & blossom,
> like the crocus it shall blossom
> abundantly,
> and rejoice with joy and singing"

Amen